

# FTGTTG

## Our Legacy of Love and Hope

### Volume 21 R

Tommie Rice was born March 25, 1902, the same year Henry Carrier developed the precursor to the modern air conditioner. As he grew up, Rice saw the world around him rapidly changing. He was witness to both World Wars and the growing racial tensions in the U.S. However, Rice did not let these hard times hold him back. According to his son Earl, “my dad was quite the entrepreneur and had a nose for being in business.”

In 1946, Rice put on his first of many hats in Haywood County by establishing a grocery store. At the time, this was a huge deal in the community, as it was rare for an African-American to step into the mainstream and be a business owner. Two years later, in 1948, he began a movie theatre near his store. Rice owned a 16mm projector which allowed to him to take his movies on the road as well. He showed them at rural schools and churches throughout the area.

At the same time Rice was running both his store and theatre, he also maintained a farming operation. It was normal for him to put in 16 or 17-hour days. According to his son, “he would be called a workaholic by today’s standards.” Though he worked hard, Rice found time to provide entertainment to many in the community. Around 1949, his store had one of the only television sets in the area and people would come from miles away to watch World Series games and Friday night boxing matches.

In the early 1950s, Rice's theatre served as a dance hall on the weekends. Often times, a number of other Memphis musicians such as Hammie Nixon, Rufus Thomas, Sleepy John Estes, and Bobby Bland would show up at his theatre to join in and play with their buddies. Even Memphis blues legend B.B. King once worked for Rice.

As time went on, he continued establishing businesses in Haywood County. In 1952, he started a fertilizer business. He purchased a few tractors and successfully got that business up and running.

However, Rice was much more than simply a businessman.

"My dad was a loving husband and father of 12, a church-going and God-fearing man, and most of all, a community servant," said Earl Rice. "He wanted to leave the world in a better place than he found it."

Rice stressed education as a means to make a difference in society. Out of his twelve children, seven of them are college educated. Rice did not want to see people have to stop pursuing higher education because of financial reasons. Therefore, he was willing to help out a neighbor if they needed some money for tuition.

During the 1950s and 60s, Rice became heavily involved in the Civil Rights Movement. He utilized his store as a meeting place for community meetings. He was a charter member of the Haywood County Civic and Welfare League. His struggles for civil rights did not come without its hardships. His store was boycotted and lost a great deal of business during this time because of his involvement in the movement. Some of his suppliers, including Coca-Cola, refused to continue to supply him. He was forced to drive long distances to pick up supplies to keep his business running. However, his fight was a success, and in 1960, blacks were granted the right to vote in Haywood County.

At the same time Rice was fighting for civil rights, many blacks in Haywood County were being put off their land. A Tent City of displaced farmers was established and Rice fed many of these people out of his store during this time. The Tent City of Haywood County lasted only a short time because of the generosity of people like Rice in the community allowed the displaced to get back on their feet relatively quickly.

Rice focused his life on others rather than himself. He led a fulfilling life and enjoyed most the simple things in life. According to his son Earl, who considers his father his hero, "I think the world was definitely a better place after my dad." There is no doubt that his memories live on with his family and friends and serve as inspiration to all who knew him.